READ AND COLOUR RIVER STORIES

The story of Narmada

written by **Priya Krishnan**
illustrated by **Uma Krishnaswamy**

SKM-1126

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The Story of Kaveri
The Story of Ganga
The Story of Narmada
The Story of Brahmaputra

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The Story of Tipu Sultan
The Story of Rani of Jhansi
The Story of Dandi March
The Story of 15th August 1947

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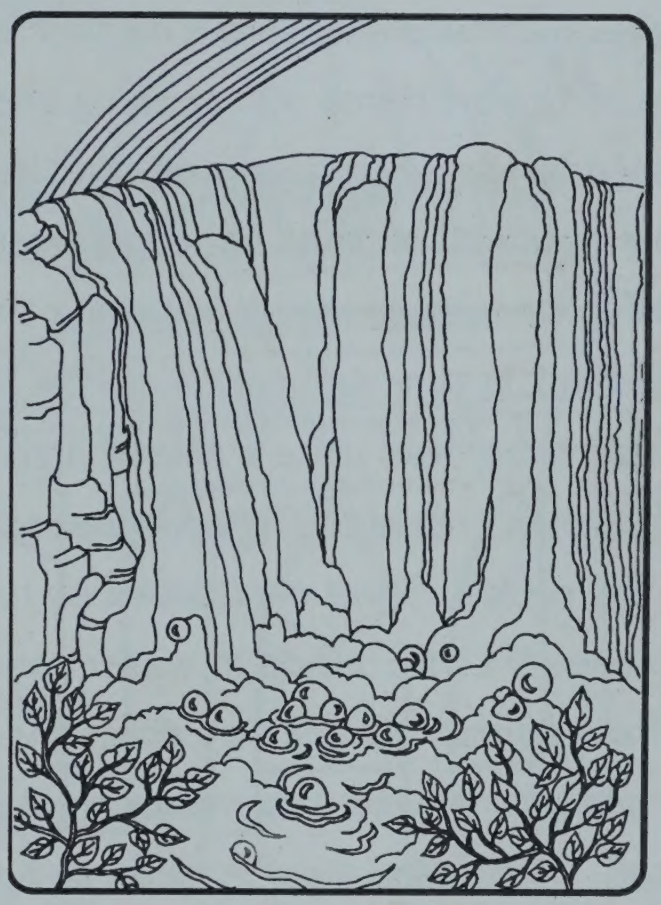
THE STORY OF
NARMADA



written by PRIYA KRISHNAN
illustrated by UMA KRISHNASWAMY

Tulika

Mandu is an old town on the Malwa plateau in Madhya Pradesh. Scattered within it are ruins of beautiful palaces and monuments built about 700 years ago, when it was ruled by the sultans of Malwa.

One of the sultans was Baz Bahadur. It is said that he and Rani Roopmati liked to spend time at their favourite spot on the edge of the plateau, looking down at the river Narmada flowing peacefully by.

Today, the river doesn't flow as freely. At different points, huge walls or dams stand across Narmada's waters. The river is now known all over the world because of the problems surrounding these big dams. A journey from the source, down to where the river empties into the sea, brings us close to the river and all that happens around Narmada.

Standing now where Roopmati once did, watching the river still winding past, takes us far back in time to stories of how Narmada was born. One of them says that there was once a severe drought here in central India. Famine threatened the land. The gods asked Shiva to help end the suffering of the people. Shiva meditated so hard and for so long, that he began to sweat! Little beads of water ran down his body, and began to flow like a stream all the way down the hills. Then suddenly, the stream turned into a lively, charming woman.

Shiva was enchanted. So pleased was he, that he named her Narmada, 'one who pleases'. He blessed her saying, 'You will always be holy, always unending,'

Roopmati's Pavilion overlooking Narmada

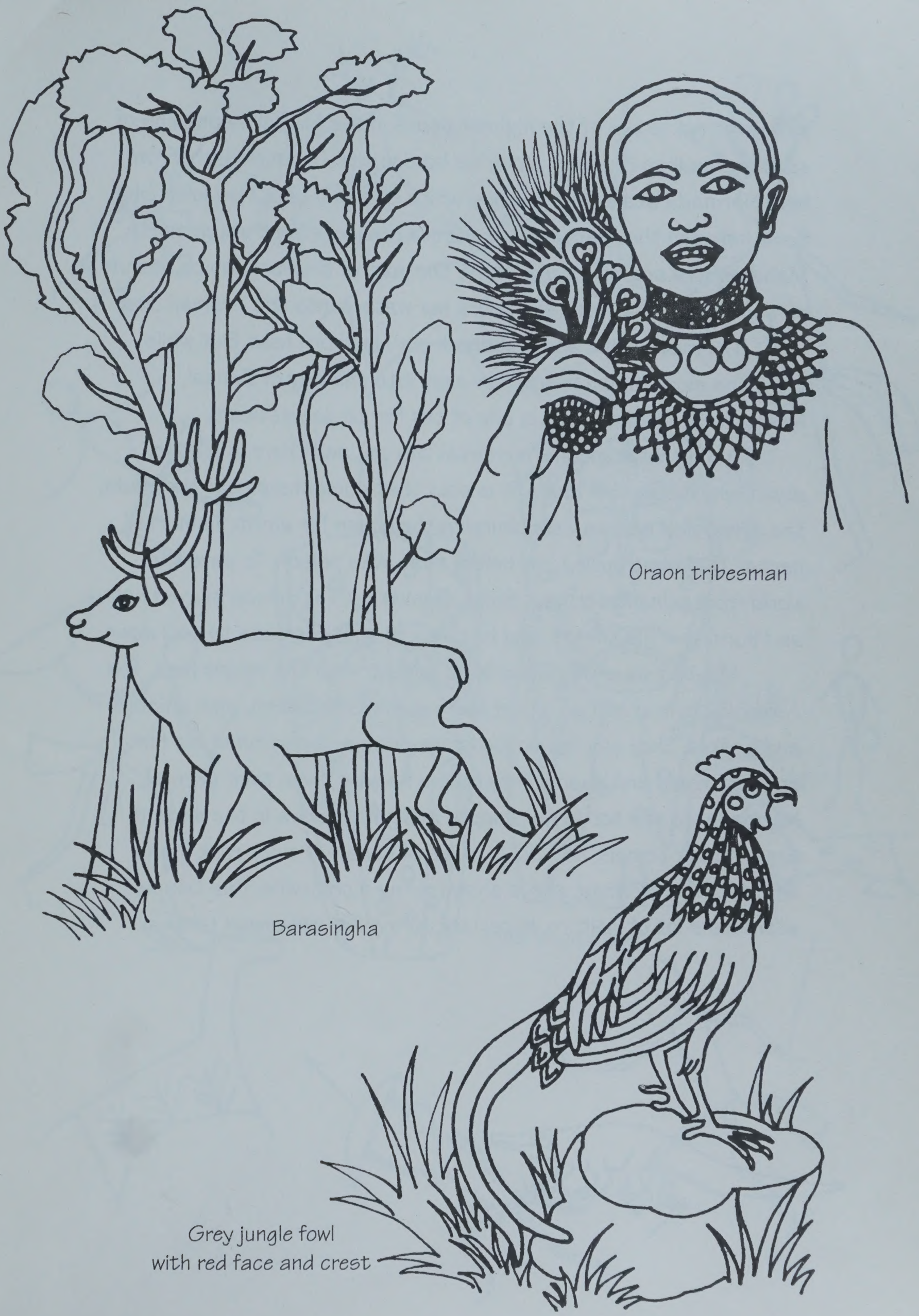
You leap across the land
Like a bounding deer.
The people call you Reva.
Shiva found you
Delightful
And enchanted
Named you Narmada.

Many, many, years ago, a wandering musician made up this song about Narmada. Travelling through the hills, she twists and turns, curls and bends, leaps and bounds like a deer. She seems so full of energy. Perhaps this is why Narmada's other name is Reva, which means agile or active. As she darts along, she gurgles noisily as if to say, 'Come, play with me!'

The tribal people living along the river's banks sing many songs about the way she moves, of how pleasant or angry she can be. Their songs also speak of their own lives, the animals, birds and trees along her banks and in the forests she passes through.

These folk songs have been around for longer than we can imagine. This is because much before people lived together as groups along the Indus and Ganga rivers, the Narmada valley was already humming with life. It has been home to different tribes, their ways of life, their arts and crafts. These are the Adivasis, the 'earliest settlers of the land'.

Cormorant



Oraon tribesman

Barasingha

Grey jungle fowl
with red face and crest

Amarkantak is one of the highest peaks in the Maikal mountains of eastern Madhya Pradesh, along its border with Chhattisgarh. From here Narmada starts her journey, which is about 1,300 km long. She flows between the Vindhya and Satpura ranges, slips through north Maharashtra and into Gujarat. At the port of Bharuch, which stands on the Gulf of Khambat, she pours her waters into the Arabian Sea.

The rivers Sone and Mahanadi are also born here. But while they, and most Indian rivers, flow east into the Bay of Bengal, Narmada is different. She is one of the few to go westward.

Amarkantak means 'immortal throat', and there is a story about why it has this name. It is said that somewhere near Narmada, the devas and asuras were churning the ocean for amrit, 'immortal' nectar. But what spilled out before that, was poison. To save the world from being destroyed, Shiva drank it up. The poison stayed hot and burning in his throat, and he came to these forests to cool down.

Maybe this is why Shiva is so popular with the people here. The Adivasis think of him as one of them. He lives like them, with animals and snakes. They say the sound of his drum and rhythm of his feet created music and dance. They believe he gave them their beloved Narmada, so she too is worshipped along with Shiva in the ancient Amarkantak temple. Her idol is made of basalt, a black rock found here. Like River Ganga, she is shown riding a crocodile. This temple attracts a lot of visitors, especially during the Shivaratri festival.

Mugger

Tribal wood masks

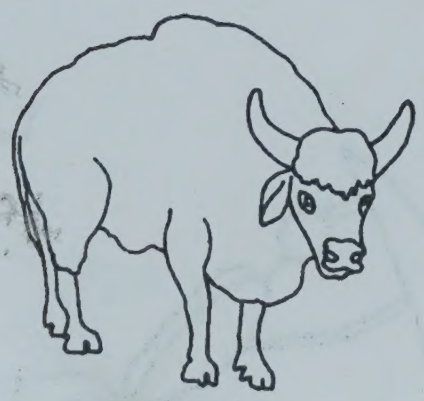
Ancient cave paintings

Trickling down from Amarkantak, Narmada runs across the red soil of the Maikal plateau. Many streams join in with her as she moves through the thick forests of teak, sal, mahua and other tall trees.

The land here is rocky, and the river has to often gush through gorges and climb over cliffs, thundering down the other side as waterfalls or swirling rapids. Narmada seems to know her way through these ups and downs. But then, she should! This is her very own garden. The people call these forests Mai-ka-bageecha, 'mother's garden'. Narmada is mai or mother to her people, because she creates life and cares for it.

The sal and teak trees are valuable to the tribals and villagers. They use the sal seeds as medicine. The fat from the seeds is sold to factories to make a butter, which is sometimes used instead of cocoa butter for chocolates. Wood from the teak tree is sold as timber that goes to make houses and furniture.

Wolves, leopards, bears, pangolins, hyenas, flying squirrels, blackbucks, cheetals and tigers once lived here. But as trees were cut down, most of these animals lost their shelter and moved away. A few bears, deer and leopards remain. Crocodiles and monitor lizards bask lazily on the rocks along the river.



Gaur

Adivasi dancers

Tiger

Madia Gond tribesmen

The Maikal plateau covers a large part of Mandla district. Spread across here is the vast Kanha National Park, which protects the rich wildlife of this region. Animals roam the forests without fear of being hunted down — tigers, different kinds of deer, langur, wild boar, jackal, sloth bear and panther. There are birds, too, like the jungle fowl, grey and painted partridge and the red wattled lapwing. Project Tiger was started at Kanha to conserve India's tiger population. In 1974, the park was declared a tiger reserve, to breed and protect them.

At the plateau's western edge, Narmada heads south to the plains. Rice, wheat, maize and cotton grow in the fields which she makes so fertile.

She then turns around the old fort in Mandla town, once the capital of Graha Mandla. This kingdom was at first ruled by Gond tribals. As time went by, Gond rulers married Rajput princesses from northern India. One such princess was the wise Rani Durgavati, who ruled in the 16th century AD. Her husband, the Gond king, died when their son was just five years old. Durgavati had to look after the kingdom until the little prince was ready to take over. She would fearlessly lead armies into battle and win many of them. The day the sultan of Mandu, Baz Bahadur, was defeated by her, he swore never to pick up a sword again!

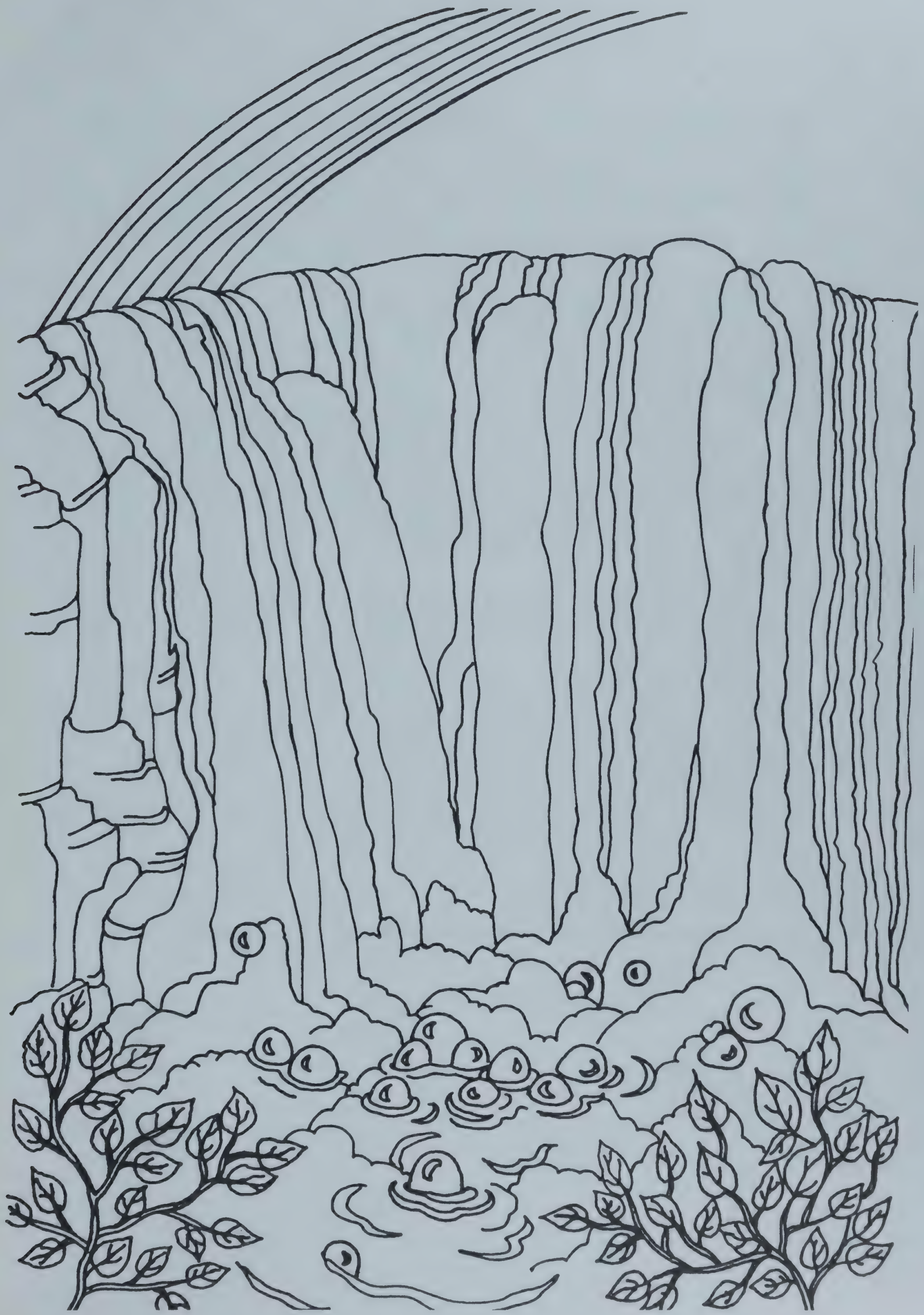
Leaving Mandla, Narmada widens and flows north towards Jabalpur. This is an old city, a little away from the river bank. After this, she turns westward, and doesn't change direction again.

Jabalpur is named after Jabali, who was a learned rishi in the court of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya. The legend goes that to keep a promise, Dasaratha had to send his eldest son, Rama, to the forest for 14 years. Rama's brother, Bharata, and Jabali went into the forest to plead with him to return. Dasaratha was no longer alive, and so the rishi said that his promise didn't matter any more.

But Rama was terribly upset by the rishi's words. Realising that he had hurt Rama, Jabali was sorry. He came to Narmada's banks to repent and purify himself in her waters. Like him, many still come to Narmada to ask forgiveness. They go on a pilgrimage to the sacred places around her banks.

Narmada Mata Jayanti is a popular festival here. It celebrates the birth of the river. People visit the Amarkantak temple. They also go downstream to Hoshangabad, a town on the banks of the river. Here, flowing broad, Narmada's waters sparkle with thousands of flickering diyas, or oil lamps, which are set afloat.

Floating diya



It is said that the rocks over which Narmada flows are so old, that they were there even when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Some fossils of prehistoric creatures have, in fact, been found in this region. The rocks are also rich in minerals — bauxite, used to make aluminium, is mined from the rocks around Mandla.

These rocky hills and plateaus make her journey more exciting. Every now and then, she jumps over them and cascades down as waterfalls, some big, some small.

Not very far from her source at Amarkantak, where she is fed by many streams, Narmada swells with water. She dashes blindly towards a black basalt cliff, about 25 m high. There is no other way for her then, but to plunge off it and come crashing down as the Kapildhara falls!

Again, a little southwest of Jabalpur, Narmada rolls down as a spectacular waterfall. Her waters splash against the cliffs and let off a strong spray which looks like dhuan, meaning smoke. This gives the waterfall the name, Dhuan Dhar. A few muggers, a species of crocodile, live in and around the pools of water formed by the falls.

The river now flows gently through tall limestone cliffs at Bheraghat. These glittering, white marble rocks have little streaks of black and green, and their reflection glimmers in Naramda's quiet waters. A lot of this marble is used to make idols of gods and goddesses and statues of famous leaders all across India.

Red wattled lapwing

The Mahadeo hills lie south of the river and stretch right up to the Maharashtra border. This region is believed to be 'Kipling country'. The famous author Rudyard Kipling, who was born and lived in India, knew these forests well. It is the world in which he places his story, 'The Jungle Book'. It is somewhere here that Mowgli, the little boy in the book, was brought up by the Seoni wolves, where danger lurked at every corner in the form of Sher Khan, the tiger!

Many Adivasis still live in forests and villages close to Narmada. The Amarkantak forests are home to Gonds and Baigas. Some of them, along with Kurkus and Bhilalas, live around the Mahadeo hills.

These tribal groups have their own languages and stories, and gods such as Rani Kajol and Indal Dev. Since the Gonds live so close to nature, many of their clans, or families, take their names from plants or animals. One of them, Markam, takes its name from the mango tree. Another is Tekam, from the teak tree, and yet one more calls itself Netam, after the dog.

The Gonds are known to be a brave tribe. Though they were finally defeated, they stubbornly fought off the Mughals for a long time. Today, they lead a more settled life and usually earn their living by growing vegetables, grains and pulses. Since they depend on the land, most of their festivals celebrate the seasons and a rich harvest.

Gond huts

Rani Durgavati goes to battle

Narmada now leaves the rocks and forests, and slopes down to the broad plains. She flows past the towns of Hoshangabad, Nimmavar and Maheshwar, which sit right on her banks. The fields along the river have a black, fertile soil that is good for growing cotton.

Maheshwar is an ancient town which became well-known in the 18th century, under the Maratha general, Malhar Rao Holkar. The most famous ruler here was his daughter-in-law, Ahilya Bai. She became queen when still quite young, after her husband and son both died. But she was a very mature ruler. She had to fight many wars and, to keep the hard-won peace, had to establish good relations with other kingdoms. She was concerned about her people and gave generously to temples and charities.

The town is also known for its tradition of handweaving beautiful fabrics, including the fine Maheshwari saree. The delicate wavy patterns in the borders of the saree seem to capture the ripples of the river that flows by.

For a long time, the craft was neglected. Weavers were not paid enough for their skill. The Holkar family then set up the Reva Society, which sees that the weavers work in good conditions and get a regular income. Without their help, this exquisite craft might have vanished.

Baiga tribesman

Lamps float on the river at Maheshwar

Down the ages, those who live along Narmada have shared a special bond with her. She has belonged to them.

Now there are plans to take her waters to places further away — to parts of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat where there is little rainfall and not much water for people and crops. Building dams is one way of doing this. The Narmada Valley Authority is constructing more than 3,100 dams, big and small, across the river. The biggest among these is the Sardar Sarovar Project.

However, what is likely to happen if so many dams, especially big ones, come up on the river? They can cause earthquakes in this area which is already prone to them. They can also flood places around, because dammed water rushes out with such force that it washes away everything in its path. Some people have already lost their land and homes, and have had to move away.

Are big dams more dangerous than useful? Are there other ways of collecting water for drinking, irrigation and electricity? Will those who lose their homes be given land somewhere else?

These questions have grown into movements. Well-known among them is the Narmada Bachao Andolan. From across the country, all kinds of people — environmentalists, politicians, writers and artists, and the local Adivasis — have joined together to save Narmada and the land she flows through. For everyone wants to see her as she has always been, flowing clear and free, as this local song says:

Ma Reva tharo paani nirmal
Khal khal behto jaye . . .

Barking Deer

A Narmada poster — write in your own slogan!

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This is the second set in the series, after Read and Colour Freedom Stories. Balancing simple text with detailed line drawings that can be coloured in by the child, the books introduce 7 to 12 year olds to life in and around some of India's important rivers. Older children will be able to read the text themselves. Younger ones may want the stories read aloud. All children, however, will ask questions. Take time to answer these questions and travel with your child on an interactive journey of learning.

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